

R 272154Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY BELMOPAN
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1702
WHA CENTRAL AMERICA COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS BELMOPAN 000080

FOR WHA/CEN - CHRISTOPHER ASHE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [SOCI](#) [BH](#)

SUBJECT: PREVIEWING BELIZE'S MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS 2009: UDP LIKELY
TO KEEP ITS POLITICAL MOMENTUM

Summary

¶1. Summary: After a landslide victory in the 2008 general elections, the United Democratic Party (UDP) is now preparing for the 2009 municipal elections amidst criticism for lacking a clear policy agenda and a weakened economy. The new Peoples United Party (PUP) leadership has declared its determination to distance itself from the PUP 'old guard', whom most hold responsible for the mismanagement of the country's finances. However, most expect little to change during this election on March 4. End summary.

United Democratic Party (UDP)

¶2. The UDP came to power in February 2008 after campaigning its anti-corruption platform. During its first year in office, however, it has encountered several snags in implementing its program. The UDP bundled two proposed constitutional amendments into a single piece of legislation. One amendment, initially floated as part of the UDP platform, changes the make-up of the Senate from a rubber stamp body (controlled by the ruling party) to a body with the majority of seats designated for the opposition and several social partners (Council of Churches and others). It will be a real counter-balance to the power of the executive with a majority in National Assembly. The second proposed amendment declares that all minerals (including oil) in Belize are the property of the people and by extension the government. The terms of this proposed amendment are being contested in the Supreme Court (the second highest court in Belize) and a decision is pending. The litigation over mineral rights has put the amendment on the Senate into limbo since the two issues were bundled in the legislation. Additionally, highly publicized internal UDP disputes, allegations of corruption at the municipal level, and severe flooding in 2008 have not helped the UDP.

¶3. At the UDP party conventions candidate slots for mayoral positions have been hotly contested and there seem to be some intra-party disputes. We see cabinet ministers publicly supporting different candidates, creating the appearance of a power struggle at the ministerial level. In addition, there have been numerous allegations of financial mismanagement and lack of transparency at the office of the Belize City Council.

People's United Party (PUP)

¶4. Among Belize's nine municipalities, only one has a PUP mayor -- Punta Gorda. Since the general elections, the PUP has emerged as a split party. A new party leader, Johnny Briceno, has been working to transform the party's image to that of a more accountable and responsible party. However, there remains a substantial divide between the new regime and the old party leadership in the run up to election this March 4.

¶5. Comment: The results of the municipal elections will be only marginally indicative of the Belize public's assessment of the performance of the UDP leadership after one year in power. Historically, the incumbent party usually garners most of the seats after a landslide general election victory. Additionally,

dissatisfaction with a new government is usually indicated low voter turnout, rather than a vote for the opposition. We have also noted this general lack of interest in the municipal elections in recent conversations with members of the Belizean public.

¶6. The Vision Inspired by the People (VIP) Party is running again in Belmopan. Although they received a substantial number of votes in the last municipal election, their usual tactic of publicizing problems of the incumbent government and offering the VIP as a third party alternative has been noticeably less successful. This time around they have less funding and are not expected to have a significant impact on this election.

¶7. The main issues in this election include cost of living, crime, government finances, and territorial rights. Many of the financial challenges have carried over from the previous PUP government. The new PUP leadership is determined to distance itself from the 'old guard' whom most hold responsible for mismanagement of the country's finances. However, most expect little to change during this election on March 4. End Comment.

DIFFILY